

Message

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Subject: ADN Story: Begich on Pebble: "Wrong mine, wrong place"

<http://www.adn.com/2014/01/19/3281944/begich-on-pebble-wrong-mine-wrong.html>

Begich on Pebble: "Wrong mine, wrong place"

BY LISA DEMER

ldemer@adn.com January 19, 2014 Updated 20 minutes ago

Read more here: <http://www.adn.com/2014/01/19/3281944/begich-on-pebble-wrong-mine-wrong.html#storylink=cpy>

U.S. Sen. Mark Begich says that he's concluded the proposed Pebble mine cannot be developed without harming the Bristol Bay region's world-famous red salmon runs.

"Wrong mine, wrong place, too big," Begich said in an interview. "Too many potential long-term impacts to a fishery that is pretty critical to that area but also to Alaska, to world markets."

He's the first member of Alaska's current congressional delegation to speak out firmly in opposition to the mine. His comments came after the Environmental Protection Agency released a hefty -- and controversial -- scientific study Wednesday that found a big mine posed significant risks to Bristol Bay salmon. The huge Pebble gold and copper deposit is at the headwaters of two rivers that together account for 25 percent of the world's sockeye salmon production. Bristol Bay overall produces half the world's red salmon.

Begich's language almost mirrors former U.S. Sen. Ted Stevens' wording back in 2008 when asked about Pebble at a campaign stop in Kodiak. "I am not opposed to mining, but it is the wrong mine for the wrong place," Stevens said. (Begich, a Democrat, upset Stevens in that year's general election. Two years later Stevens was killed in a plane crash during a silver salmon fishing trip in the region.)

Begich, in an interview with the Daily News in Anchorage over the weekend, described how he had met repeatedly with players on both sides in an effort to understand whether a big mine could be built without damaging the fish.

"I think it will harm the environment, harm the salmon, harm the jobs that are connected to the fisheries industry out there," Begich said in the interview.

Pebble said it was disappointed Begich had come out against a mine that would generate significant jobs and revenue.

"We also are stunned that an Alaskan senator supports the EPA -- a federal agency acting unilaterally -- to make decisions about future development on state land in Alaska," Pebble said in a statement Sunday. "Finally, it is no secret that there is a substantial difference of opinion regarding the science of EPA's recent Bristol Bay assessment. Not many Alaskans think EPA is impartial."

In December, Begich called a meeting that included some of the sharpest critics, including former state Senate President Rick Halford, as well as project backers and developers, including Pebble Ltd. Partnership chief executive John Shively. He said he wanted to see if they could find common ground. They couldn't.

Begich noted that Stevens and former Govs. Tony Knowles and Jay Hammond all opposed the proposed mine. Knowles has called it "terrifying."

The EPA first announced in February 2011 that it was going to study the impacts of a big mine on the Bristol Bay watershed, rather than seek to block the mine outright as some tribes and Alaska Native groups wanted.

U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, initially welcomed the EPA review, and Begich said they were aligned. But within days, she warned against EPA "overreaching."

On Wednesday, both Murkowski and Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, blasted the EPA over its study, emphasizing the prospect of EPA vetoing the mine under the Clean Water Act before developers submit a plan or seek permits. EPA says it doesn't yet know what direction it will take. A number of environmental, fishing and Native groups want it to kill the mine.

"For the EPA to come into Alaska and lay the groundwork to preemptively oppose a project located entirely on state lands, and subject to rigorous state permitting, is a serious threat to not only Alaska's sovereignty, but the rights of states nationwide, regardless of the nature of the project subject to Clean Water Act permitting," Young fumed in a press release.

"EPA's assessment stops short of prohibiting responsible development in the Bristol Bay watershed, but the agency has strongly implied that this report will be a basis to preemptively veto economic opportunities in the region in the future," Murkowski said. "I remain convinced that a preemptive veto of a mine or any other project, which the agency claims it can do under the Clean Water Act, would set a terrible precedent for development in our state and across the nation."

Begich said he wasn't calling for EPA to veto the mine. Alaskans have been pushing him for years to take a stand, and with the study finally complete, he said it was time. His office has received about 2,800 communications from Alaskans against Pebble and about 280 in support of it, he said.

The project may falter on its own, Begich said. Northern Dynasty Minerals, now the project's sole owner after partner Anglo American dropped out, is looking for new investors.

Begich said he wasn't sure what impact his position would have, other than to add scrutiny. He said it shouldn't reflect upon mining in general. He said supports a number of mines and proposed mines in Alaska. He said he helped Red Dog, the big zinc and lead mine near Kotzebue, obtain new permits recently and visited that mine Friday.

Pebble Partnership chief Shively has said repeatedly that the deposit can be developed without destroying the salmon runs and that new salmon habitat can be created. If developers can't meet strict state and federal standards, they won't get their permits and the mine won't happen, Shively has said.

No environmental harm will come from permit reviews, Pebble says.

Begich said Pebble has been talking about submitting its plan and permit applications for years. Murkowski sent a letter to Pebble Partnership leaders last year in frustration over the lack of specifics about the project. She urged the group to release mining plans and a timeline for development.

Even if new salmon habitat can be created, why risk it? Begich said.

The argument of "let's just move nature, because it will work out later someplace else" diminishes the value of fisheries that have sustained generations, he said.

"We already have what we have. Why would you mess with that, for a short-term gain, when we have a long-term industry that is sustainable, growing and employing more Alaskans than ever before?" Begich said.